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THE POETRY OF THE CRYSTAL PALACE.

BY ERNEST RENAN.

Translated for THE CRAYON.

It is related that, at the fair of Ocadh, a commercial rendezvous and a literary congress of Arabia before the time of Mahomet, the poets of different tribes publicly recited their verses, and that the pieces which most excited the admiration of their hearers were transcribed in letters of gold and affixed with nails of gold to the gates of the Kaaba; such is the origin of the seven *Moallakat*, those admirable poems wherein the Arab ante-Islamite life is delineated with so great a charm. There can be no doubt that the productions displayed in the Crystal Palace are in all points superior to those which figured at the fair of Ocadh; but the warmest partisans of progress will admit that an exception must be made in regard to poetry; and that, in this respect, the two exhibitions offer no comparison. Let me make amends to the unknown poets whose verses have not yet come under my eye; it is enough for me that none of their works have been accepted by the public, that they have not received that consecration which forms an essential part of the beauty of a poem. How a reunion of men, which, formerly, and even at no distant day, would have been surrounded by a halo of poesy, could pass away without speaking to the imagination, and without producing a stanza worthy of remembrance—is certainly a problem deserving of study, and one which in default of poems to be examined, it is well to contemplate a few moments.

The past has had its ovation days, noble like itself, and poesy was lacking to none. Whilst the gods maintained the privilege of collecting men together, fêtes were as much literary congresses as they were religious reunions; the games of Greece had Pindar to celebrate their victors, and from the mouth of Herodotus was heard the first simple utterances of history. When the saints succeeded to the gods, pilgrimages became the active centres of legendary creation, of which each one had its poem. Tournaments were, in their way, fêtes of honor and of beauty, the poesy of the troubadours and of the Minnesingers being allied to these as to its cradle. Scarcely a place in the world could be named where men have congregated together, around which art and poetry have not blossomed.

When the middle age in its decline had exhausted all the resources of its poetic and religious life, an institution, full of originality, came to revive them for a short period. It was an extraordinary spectacle, that of the jubilee of the year 1300, to which more than two millions of men re-

sorted under the impulse of astill living faith, from all parts of Christendom. Upon certain days, Rome counted in its bosom as many as two hundred thousand strangers; breaches in its walls had to be made in order to avoid the accidents which were so frequent at its gates. In spite of more than one circumstance revealing the degradation of the times, the jubilee had its poem. Dante was at Rome in 1300; he saw the two long files of pilgrims who traversed the bridge of St. Angelo "on one side, all having their eyes turned towards the castle in order to go to St. Peter's, on the other, going toward the mountain." He called to mind this image in his *Inferno*, and, as a memento of the event which he considered as the grandest of the century, he placed his journey through the invisible regions in the year 1300. Art, as well as poetry, consecrated this great assemblage of the Christian world. Giotto, who appears to have been of the number of the pilgrims, painted, in the portico of the Lateran, Boniface VIII. publishing the bull of convocation that was to shake Europe to its centre. History, too, in this secular festival, found the source of its awakening. "Dwelling with pilgrims in the holy city," said Villani, "seeing the grand and ancient things there, and reading the mighty deeds of the Romans, described by Virgil, Sallust, Lucan, Livy, Valerius Maximus, Paul Orosius, and other masters of history, I took their style and manner of writing, and, inasmuch as Florence, like a daughter and creature of Rome, was particularly fitted to accomplish great things, it appeared to me suitable to relate in a volume the beginning of this city, its past, its present, and whatever of its future pleases God."

Thus, always and everywhere, a thought superior to their finite existence, has united men, and translated itself into diverse symbols through the instrumentality of poetry and art. For the first time, our century has convoked great multitudes without proposing to them an ideal end. To antique games, to pilgrimages, to jousts, to jubilees, have succeeded industrial comitia. Twice has Europe been disturbed to see merchandise displayed and to compare material productions, and upon returning from this new mode of pilgrimage, no one has complained that anything was wanting to it. Is there a more marked sign of the revolution which has been accomplished in the opinions of mankind, and of the displacement which is effected in the relative value of things? Is it not evident that the world has lost its nobility, and that to its lofty ambitions of former times, which one may call, if he choose, barbarous and chimerical, the humblest and most positive cares have succeeded? The prophet of our age, Fourier, has predicted that, some day, instead of meeting in battle or in œcumenical councils,

the rival portions of humanity would dispute over the excellence of the manufacture of little cakes. This great progress is not yet indeed fully accomplished, but many steps have been taken in this direction; it is only a few days ago that the strongest heads in Europe were occupied in determining what nation best fabricates silk or cotton.

It would be rash to utter words here of censure or reproach; accustomed to respect *les faits accomplis*, our age does not willingly admit that we may criticise the general direction of its movement. Besides, it could not be denied, that material ameliorations, when they contribute to raise the standard of the lower classes, and to bring nations together, serve a religious and moral purpose, and consequently are entitled to respect. The error is not in proclaiming industry good and useful, but in exalting it disproportionately, and in attaching too much importance to certain improvements. In this order of things, the good once obtained, refinement is of little value, for if the end of human life be happiness, the past, without any of these superfluities, has satisfactorily realized it. And if, as the wise have good reason to think, the only necessary thing for us is moral and intellectual nobility, these accessories contribute little enough to it. History presents admirable intellectual developments and golden ages of happiness, which have grown out of a highly gross material condition. The brahminic race of India attained a range of philosophical speculation which Germany alone of our days has surpassed, although remaining, in respect to outward civilization, on a level with the least advanced societies. The incomparable ideal of the Gospel, where the moral sense is displayed with such wonderful delicacy, transports us into the midst of a life as simple as that of our rural districts, and where the complications of outward life occupy scarcely any place.

These are, it is true, but partial civilizations, where the idea of *Art* and that instinct which brings man to ornate what surrounds him, is almost entirely wanting. A complete civilization prizes *Art* and beauty almost equally with morality and intellectual development. But, far from the progress of art being parallel to that which a nation makes in a taste for the *comfortable* (I am obliged to make use of this barbarous word to express an idea of little French significance) it is allowable to say, without being paradoxical, that the time when and the country where the comfortable has become the principal mania of the people, the public have been less endowed with art. The two most beautiful artistic moments in the history of humanity, are, it cannot be questioned, those presented to us by Greece in the fifth century before the Christian era, and Italy at the period of the Renaissance. Now, if we study these two great epochs closely, we shall see that by the side of a sentiment for beauty, marvellously developed, there was an almost entire absence of thought concerning everything that is based upon well-being and the commodities of life. Private comfort among the Greeks was almost unknown; the citizens of those small towns, who

erected around them so many admirable public monuments, dwelt in houses more than plain, in which a few vases, masterpieces of elegance it is true, formed the whole of its furnishing. Never was there seen more grace and simplicity combined than in that exquisite Panathenaic procession on the *cella* of the Parthenon? The costume of those young girls who represent to us the aristocracy of Athens, does not surpass that of a peasant in luxury; the objects which they carry for the sacrifice stand for the humblest and commonest utensils.

Italy of the Renaissance presents the same contrast. The Vatican, that matchless sanctuary of great art, is, in respect to the comfortable, the most gloomy palace in the world—naked, dilapidated, uninhabitable, open to every wind that blows. The most insignificant parvenu of our days would not dwell in the rooms of Cardinal Babbiena decorated by Raphael, before having them fitted up in keeping with his person and his fortune. Italy, having passed through eras of the deepest degradation and epochs of the most deplorable bad taste, yet has never lost a sentiment of nobility and of grandeur; it has always remained indifferent to what we hold to be essential to an advanced civilization. Compare the Italian palace (and the old French *hotel* which sprung from it) with the English residence: on the one side no anxiety concerning the petty details of life, no thought about commodities, everything subservient to a noble style, extreme negligence, and, let me add, grievous, for all that which is solely founded upon neatness and orderly appearances; on the other side an extraordinary adaptation to every necessity, the useful held to be supreme law, an exquisite cleanness but an absence of a sentiment for elevated beauty, a pretension to *Art*, the result of which when developed ends in awkward and puerile productions. Is this due to a lack of a right disposition, or the consequence of a prevailing and exclusive taste? Certainly not; for, in his admiration, the Englishman is the most confident and the most eclectic of men. It is because the article itself excludes any estimation of its style; a pot of English manufacture is better adapted to its purpose than all the Greek vases of either Vulci or Nola; the latter are works of art, while the English pot never will be other than a household implement. Why is Rome one of the places of the world where one soars the readiest to a sentiment of great and beautiful things? Because common life is almost effaced there. On the day when the petty customs of European civilization become dominant there, on the day when stores, imitating those of the boulevards, shall replace the humble shops of the piazza Navona, when the manufacturer's chimney shall send forth its clouds upon the Aventine, then Rome—the Rome, I mean, so dear to all who think, and who feel, the city of the soul, as Byron called it—will exist no longer.

But I desire to establish my thesis by a much more decisive example, and one which constitutes a fundamental fact in the history of humanity. There exists a nation, which, a long time before any other, possessed the most

refined industrial processes and which even to the end of the last century surpassed the noblest races in everything that relates to the commodities of life—that nation is China. China offers the remarkable phenomenon of a people who have never been other than practical; who, instead of fables or a mythology, have had a positive and specific literature from the very beginning; instead of poems, treatises on technology; in fact, China has never had anything that deserves the name of art. With its wonderful skill of the hand, with its coquetry and taste for elegance, it has never reached the expression of beauty; and likewise with its advanced material processes, it has nothing whatever that bears any resemblance to science. I should be afraid of becoming systematic were I to undertake to set forth here the views which a comparative study of civilizations leads one to form upon the industrial development of the various races of mankind: it might be demonstrated that the superior races, the Indo-European, for example, remained strangers, before the advent of the Roman empire, to every idea of the comfortable; that ordinary callings, the pursuits of navigation and of industry, were for a long time the exclusive avocation of inferior races; that great people did not yield to commerce until late, and after they had already lost a portion of their nobility; that in the middle ages, the Christian nations, so superior to those of the Orient in religious and poetic instincts, received almost all of their industrial initiation from Asia; and that even to a progress in the sciences of application, which signalizes the commencement of our century, China maintained its industrial superiority over Europe; so far that there is no exaggeration in that historic formula sustained by M. Abel Remusat—European luxury is of Asiatic origin, and especially of Chinese. But the development of these theories would lead me too far, and would lead me into considerations which pass in France for paradoxes. I stop, then, at this incontestable conclusion, that industrial progress is nowhere in history parallel to that of art or of true civilization, since the two societies where art elevated itself to its greatest point, Ancient Greece and Italy of the Renaissance, ever remained unconsciously of industrial refinements.

To these two examples I will add that of France, which, in the domain of art, continued, or rather happily revived, the traditions of Italy. This justice must be rendered to the old French aristocracy, that it ever preserved the sentiment of the *grand style*, rejecting gew-gaws and trifles even at periods of the worst taste. When the bankers of the eighteenth century began to seek for objects on account of their rarity and apparent luxury, the dwelling of the noble remained grave and sombre in its solid and austere richness. It is owing to the influence of English habits that a change in customs in this respect has been effected. The English aristocracy have never had tastes as elevated as the French *noblesse*; the latter existing in the nation as a class possessing no other concern than for the liberal pursuits of war, of the intellect, of gallantry, of urbanity, did not happen to found a political edifice at once advantageous

and durable for all; but it was wonderfully calculated to maintain the tradition of a polite and brilliant society. The British aristocracy, on the contrary, brought closer to the rest of the nation by its manner of living, had to obey that natural tendency which makes our neighbors, otherwise endowed with excellent qualities, interest themselves in small matters rather than in grand ideas or in great passions. Herein that pervading absence of nobility, which in all things characterizes the English taste; herein also that desire for well-being and that *bourgeois* air which English habits have everywhere carried about with them.

I will venture to point out another evil of the tendency which I am here indicating, namely, women. It is incontestable that feminine instincts occupy a more prominent place in the general physiognomy of the world than they did formerly, in this sense, that the world is more exclusively preoccupied with matters which it has been customary to regard as within the special province of women. There have resulted from this, excellent effects for the softening of manners; but it cannot be denied that this predominance of domestic cares, at the expense of the manly concerns of the past, has contributed much to diminish the proportions of human activity. Need I say that exceptions abound, and that it is perhaps among women where we still find in our day the most of that constancy, of that noble sense of imagination which, alas! disappeared from the world along with its deep and earnest morality? Women, besides, render an immense service to humanity by preserving within its bosom the tradition of the elegance of outward life, which is almost in itself art and morality. But it seems to me that their influence in this sense has overstepped desirable limits. At other epochs, women have controlled the world, and have given to it a most majestic impulse; for example, in the first half of the seventeenth century. "You Spaniards speak very much at your ease," said Mazarin to Louis de Haro, on the occasion of the peace of the Pyrenees; "your women concern themselves only with making love; but in France it is not so; we have three women who are capable either of overthrowing or of governing three large kingdoms." This is certainly an obstacle which the political world of our days gives but little heed to, and it must be stated that since Madame de Longueville, Madame de Chevreuse and the Princess Palatine, ladies have made wonderful progress in wisdom. Instead of demanding great things of men, bold enterprises, and heroic labor, they demand wealth, in order to satisfy a taste for vulgar luxury. The general bent of the world has in this way consecrated itself to the service of woman's instincts, not to the great instincts by which she, in her way, reflects, and perhaps more perceptibly than man, the divine ideal of our nature, but those inferior instincts which constitute the least noble part of her vocation.

This general lack of grandeur, and consequently of poesy, which characterizes the most important facts of our age, reveals, then, what is most essential to the movement of modern times. Antiquity, endowed with such a delicate

fact, established a luminous distinction by giving the name of *liberal* to the arts which ennoble, and of *base* to those which do not ennoble. Certainly antiquity was mistaken and erred grievously in stamping with a sort of ignominy that thing in the world which is the most honest and the most estimable—labor. Would it be believed that from error to error it came to contemplate the laborer himself as a sort of production that was to be manufactured and sold? The principal source of the fortune of Crassus was the profit which he derived from his slaves, whom he caused to be taught every kind of profession—goldsmith, carvers, writers, and grammarians—and whom he afterward disposed of with immense profit. This is truly revolting to us; but let us take care that in our turn we do not commit mistakes no less grave. Professional labor and material industry are good things, and consequently honorable; but they are not liberal things. The useful does not ennoble; that alone ennobles which presupposes in man an intellectual or moral worth. Virtue, genius, knowledge, when these are disinterested, and only have for their object the satisfaction of a desire which leads man to penetrate the enigma of the universe, military prowess, holiness, these are the things which correspond to the moral, intellectual, or æsthetic necessities of man; all that may ennoble. Strange contradiction! men more willingly yield fame to crime when it is of imposing dimensions, than to contracted usefulness; it is that crime in itself, when accompanied with a certain prestige, furnishes a powerful idea of the human faculties and implies a grandeur of perversity which the strong races are alone capable of: it would not be an indifferent matter to-day to call oneself a Borgia. But that which is simply useful never will ennoble. I see upon the front of this ephemeral palace, by the side of names immortal in science, the names, without doubt honorable, of inventors that people desire to inscribe in the golden book of fame: they can have no place there. Industry renders immense service to society; but services which, after all, are paid for in money. To every one his compensation; to the merely useful according to the earth earthly, wealth and happiness in its terrestrial sense, and every blessing that the earth can give; to genius, virtue, glory, nobility—poverty. The man of genius has only one right, that life to him shall not be rendered impossible or insupportable; the useful man has only one right, that of being compensated according to the order of his services. This is so true, that among inventors, those only who have really forced the gates of the temple of fame, are those who have been persecuted or unrecognized. It is perfectly notorious that Jacquart* was not rich, and because he passed through life poor, fame has been justly awarded to him. In fine, the qualities which make the inventor do not exclude, but do not necessarily imply great moral elevation, and the poverty of Jacquart proves even more for his character than for the invention to which his name is attached.

* Inventor of the spinning-jenny.

We find the undertaking, then, condemned in advance—that effort which certain persons, animated by the best intentions, make in our days to attach to honest and useful things, but without elevation—the ideas of fame, glory, and poetry, which the past reserved for those great matters that make one hold in reverence the moral and intellectual faculties of man. Let me add that it is but a question here of outward distinction and not of that internal nobleness which is independent of every condition, and which only results from the moral value of the person, from his merits before God, as is expressed in the language of Christians. The world is obliged to judge by the outside and by the observances of etiquette, which judgment is often deceitful. I am persuaded that the most beautiful souls have been and always will remain unknown; for, even if they were not concealed from us, the world would not know how to recognize them. Esteem, then, cannot be based upon real merit, unless by a very small circle of persons (and at bottom this is all that delicate and refined natures crave), but upon outward appearances, which, until proved to the contrary, will be deemed to be the indications of nobleness. Now, from this point of view, it cannot be denied that every presumption of merit must be in favor of disinterested occupations. The prejudices which in the old French society led to attaching less favor to lucrative professions, and which interdicted all commerce and industry to gentlemen, were pushed doubtless to deplorable exaggerations; but, like the majority of prejudices, they reposed upon some secret reason: they contained a profound sense of the equilibrium of society, and involved perhaps less questionable consequences than the opinion which would tend to establish wealth and utility as the law of the social hierarchy, should that opinion universally prevail.

This is what some persons do not sufficiently comprehend, who, struck with the great industrial progress of our time, imagine that a progress like this inaugurates a revolution in the human mind. These persons take the accessory of civilization for its principle; if the philosophy of history were more familiar to them, they would see that perfection of mechanical art may be allied to a great moral and intellectual degeneration. I do not pretend to say that this is the case at present: no century has had minds so broad, so cultivated as ours, nor in so great a number; no century has investigated truth so subtly nor grasped it so nearly. But this phase of progress is only realized among a very small number of men, and their elevation has merely served but to isolate them. The head seems to lose more and more the government of things. It is in this sense that the general physiognomy of our time is less noble than that of former eras. The world, in reality, contains more moral and intellectual elevation than ever, but its noble parts, no longer occupying the first rank, cede their supremacy to secondary interests.

Antiquity has expressed this in a myth, which I should like to see represented in symbolic guise by the pencil of Cornelius or Kaulbach. She imagined a people of Atlantis the issue

of a commerce between gods and men, living happily by labor, and endowed with a prodigious adaptation for material works. What there was in them of divine origin for a long time prevented their happiness, wholly mundane, from degenerating into nullity; then, the divine element growing weaker and weaker, they fell beneath the condition of men, and sunk into one of depravity. Jupiter sent earthquakes and inundations upon this small and insignificant world, and nothing was left of it but a sea of mud wherein the last traces of its frivolous activity were buried. How many people of our days are there whose ideal extends not beyond the happiness of the Atlantines—an insipid and vulgar state of happiness, an age of lead or of pewter—who would make the age of iron regretted, when, all moral beauty having disappeared, nothing remained to fill up life but pleasure! Pleasure, that is saying too much! Pleasure presupposes activity, interest; the most serious and austere ages were gayest than our own. That which might survive would be folly, content with itself, expanding itself at its ease in the sun, and following without regret the funeral train of genius.

We need not, therefore, be astonished if our industrial jubilee has inspired nothing or produced nothing in the order of mind. A dazzling spectacle for the eye, an instructive study for the practical and narrow man, it says but little to the thought. Where, in all this, is there visible a sentiment of the superior destinies of humanity? It would be unjust to demand of the Crystal Palace what it could not give, and no one of the foregoing observations contains the least reflection against the idea in itself or against the manner in which it has been executed. I have merely desired to show, by one of the most striking examples of our century, how events, that once stimulated the imagination of men, have lost their inspiration in our days; how the poetic sources of the present are dried up; how, finally, poetry is of the past, inasmuch that the true poets of our time are the critic and historian, who go to seek it there.

Far from us those lamentations of wounded spirits, who bound by their sympathies to an epoch or to a form of the past, persist, by a sort of war against opinion, in styling that perversion which others call progress. Of what service would history be to us, if she did not teach us to award praise or blame with great precaution to the revolutions which occur, and the full results of which are not yet manifested? Besides, blame would here be as much misplaced as enthusiasm. Our century tends neither to good nor to evil; it tends toward mediocrity. In everything in our day it is the mediocre which succeeds. It may not be denied that the general application of minds to common pursuits, and as such sufficiently harmless, has driven much evil out of the world. But the great sides of human development, have they profited by it? The throng which crowds itself under these crystal vaults, is it more intelligent, more moral, more truly religious than it was two hundred years ago? It may be doubted. It does not appear that many

persons have gone from the exhibition of the Crystal Palace better than when they entered it; it must even be added that the purpose of the exhibitors would not have been fully attained if all its visitors had been wise enough to exclaim, on leaving, "How many things that I can well dispense with!"

GOETHE AND FAUST.

[From Gervinus's *Gesch. des deuts. Dichtung*: vol. v. p. 95.]

Translated for THE CRAYON by REV. C. T. BROOKS.

(Concluded.)

WITH Goethe's "Faust" we feel, more than in any other of his works, the prominence of that characteristic of German poetry, that it is absolutely not to be measured by the æsthetic standard, that it seeks uniformly a direct way into the soul, and strives to force itself immediately into the world of thoughts, and to influence the view of life. Poetry will always do this, where, less concerned about formal merit, it takes the greater pains about the living interest of the subject-matter. Our romantic poetry could no longer produce the immediate effects which Schiller had wrought, and even his poetry, in the bloom of his powers, abandoned in a great degree the vehement emotions which he and Goethe had called forth, when they made their first appearance, at the period when poetry coincided in the highest degree with life. It is on the height of this period, as we said, that our poem of "Faust" plants itself, and if anywhere the poet, who uniformly recorded his own existence in his works, was one with his poem, it must certainly have been here. If, therefore, anywhere his relation to the nation's state of culture is to be expressed, it cannot be in a better place than just this. If we recur to the object already expressed, which was then our problem, namely, to free ourselves from the obsolete, grey and hoary relations of the middle ages, on the spiritual track, as France did on the practical, we readily recognize the significance which the summons of the new spirit had in the nation, the animating of the youthful organs, which soon showed themselves ready and able to nourish and strengthen themselves again, particularly with all that was youthful in the world; to draw and assimilate to themselves the poetry and the life of ripening nations and a ripening humanity—to let fall, for the sake of these, the withering twigs of science and the dry leaves of theory. What Goethe was to both sides, how he first sated himself with inherited learning, then took to Art and its contemplation, and to the life of the senses and of fancy, then checked the excess of this tendency, by living into the methodical spirit of antiquity, this we have traced in the detail of the actual, and can now so much the more easily sketch the abstract image, not of the poet, but of the man, in order to recognize in him, not what the æsthetic, but what the general significance of the man and of the time, which he essentially represented, might be for our universal, human education. And here we shall find ourselves continually led back, when we consider the ensemble of his view of life, to the points of view which we found